

The Tale of Melon City

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Q1 :

Narrate 'The Tale of Melon City' in your own words.

Answer :

A model answer has been provided for students' reference.

It is strongly recommended that students prepare the answer on their own.

The Tale of Melon city is a narrative poem by Vikram Seth written in the couplet form. The poem is an account of an incident involving the monarch and citizens that took place in a city long ago. The tale is humorous with a very sharp focus on the thematic aspect. Structurally, the story has three parts-the first part mentions about a king's wish to build an arch. The second part relates his complaints regarding the faulty construction of the arch and the last part narrates how his decree ultimately falls on him leading to his hanging. The poem in a high tone of humour narrates the transition of power from the king to a melon which became a symbolic head.

In the beginning the poet narrates that there was a king in a city long ago. One day the king expressed his desire to construct an arch spanning the main thoroughfare to improve the onlookers morally and mentally. The king was just and peace loving. The construction work was soon undertaken by employing large number of labourers.

After the completion of the arch, the king went to inspect the newly constructed arch. The arch was very low. His crown struck against the arch and fell off. Feeling dishonoured, the king decided to hang the chief of builders. All arrangements were made for the hanging. The Chief of builders defended himself by shifting the responsibility to the labourers. Convinced by the argument, the king then ordered to hang all the labourers. The labourers shifted the responsibility to the size of the bricks. The king accordingly ordered the hanging of the masons. The masons in turn defended themselves and put all blame on the architect. The king ordered to hang the architect. The architect reminded the king that he (King) had made some amendments to the plan when it was shown to him. The architect indirectly put the blame on the king. The king was confused to hear the architect's argument. The king solicited the advice of the wisest man in his kingdom. Accordingly, the wisest man was found and brought to the court. He was so old that he could neither walk nor see. He gave the verdict that the arch was the real culprit. It was the arch that hit the crown violently and it fell off. So, the arch must be hanged. Accordingly, the arch was led to the scaffold. In the meantime, a councillor pointed out that it would be very shameful act to hang the arch that touched the king's crown.

The crowd which gathered there to witness the hanging of the culprit was getting restless. Sensing their mood, the king said that someone must be hanged since the nation wanted a hanging. The noose was set up. It was somewhat high. Each man was measured turn by turn. But there was only one man who was tall enough to fit in the noose, and it was the King. Interestingly, the king was hanged.

The poet then narrates the third part of the poem. In the concluding part the ministers heaved a sigh of relief that they were able to find someone, otherwise, the unruly crowd might have risen in revolt. After the death of the King, it was required to choose another king. As per the convention, the ministers sent out the herald to proclaim that the next to pass the City Gate would choose a king. An idiot happened to pass the City Gate. The guards asked him who was to be the King. The idiot answered that a melon should be chosen to be the next king. Actually that was his pet answer to all questions as he liked melons. The ministers crowned a melon and placed their Melon King reverently at the throne.

The poet narrates that the citizens were least bothered about their symbolic head. They enjoyed the principles of Laissez faire. They were very respectful to their new monarch as the new monarch did not interfere in their lives.

Q2 :

What impression would you form of a state where the King was 'just and placid'?

Answer :

A model answer has been provided for students' reference.

It is strongly recommended that students prepare the answer on their own.

A state where the king was Just and placid enjoyed peace, liberty and justice. The king was titular and symbolic. The citizens enjoyed freedom of all kinds. The real governance of the country was in the hands of the citizens. In the poem 'The Tale of a Melon City' the king had to be hanged as the citizens ultimately wanted someone to be hung. The king could not defend himself. Even though the wisest man gave the verdict that the arch was the real culprit but the citizens wanted someone to be hanged. Ultimately, the king was hanged. This shows that in such a state where the king was just and placid the citizens influenced the fate of a king.

Q3 :

How, according to you, can peace and liberty be maintained in a state?

Answer :

A model answer has been provided for students' reference.

It is strongly recommended that students prepare the answer on their own.

Peace and liberty can be maintained in a state if there exists Laissez faire, i.e., the principle of non interference by the king in the activities of the citizens. However, the king or the government must maintain law and order in the absence of which anarchy may reign in the state. There should be a happy balance between state interference and citizens rights. Only then one can expect peace and liberty to be maintained in a state.

Q4 :

Suggest a few instances in the poem which highlight humour and irony.

Answer :

A model answer has been provided for students' reference.

It is strongly recommended that students prepare the answer on their own.

The poet has used the tools of humour and irony in the poem. Humour refers to cognitive experiences which provoke laughter in a person. Irony refers to the strange aspect of a situation that is very different from what one expects. Some instances of humour and irony in the poem are:

The decision of the king to hang the chief of the builders for constructing a low arch when his crown struck against it evokes laughter among the readers. It is an example of humour. The way the king got convinced that actually the labourers who constructed the arch were responsible is also humorous. The king wanted to hang the labourers but the labourers were able to defend themselves. This situation is humorous as it evokes laughter among the readers and ironic as the readers find that the labourers are able to shift the responsibility to the architect. Ironically, the architect is able to shift the responsibility to the king himself. The selection of the wisest man who would give the verdict as to who was the real culprit evokes laughter and is, therefore, humorous. The old man ultimately blamed the arch and declared that the arch must be hanged. Ironically, one of the ministers pointed out that the gathering wanted a man to be hanged. As the noose fitted the king's neck, so, he was hanged.

The choice of a successor is humorous as an idiot is consulted in selecting the successor. The idiot chose a melon who became the symbolic head of the state.